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ABSTRACT

In this interview, Reverend Floyd H. Flake, member, United States House of Representatives and Founder of the Allen Christian School, discusses how the school was started, and outlines its focus, goals, and values. The school was begun because black students do not seem to perform as well when they are being taught with white students. Rev. Flake, with the help of members of his congregation in Jamaica (New York) decided black pupils needed an opportunity to learn in a black environment the skills everyone needs for success in contemporary society. Emphasis is on pride in black heritage and history, basic instruction in reading, writing and mathematics, instruction in a foreign language, and encouragement to attain academic excellence. Competitiveness and discipline must be elements of education for black students. Religious institutions, which still maintain the respect of large numbers of blacks, can have a significant impact on the education of black children. This educational progress will have to take place independently of the public school system and probably of white assistance. (PS)

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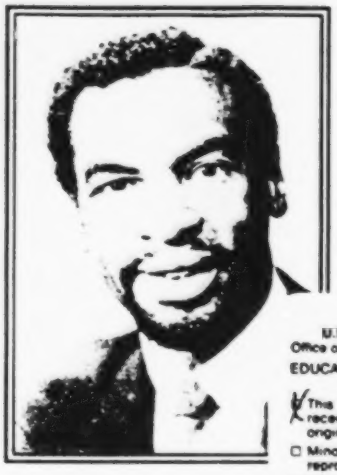

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Reaching Beyond Our Limitations

An Interview with Rev. Floyd H. Flake

Member, U.S. House of Representatives
Founder, Allen Christian School
Allen African Methodist Episcopal Church
Jamaica, New York

by Joan Davis Ratteray

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

DR. RATTERAY: Reverend Flake, how did Allen Christian School get started?

REV. FLAKE: I'm a former dean from Lincoln University and Boston University. What I discovered was that at Lincoln, the Black school, if students did not perform, you could put pressure on them. They did not feel that it was a White system that was degrading what they thought were their intellectual capabilities and skills. If a student failed and was sent home for a semester, that student usually came back a much better student.

In the White school, Black students felt that because they had gotten to the institution, no one could tell them they had deficiencies, whether it was reading, writing, math, or other skills. When we developed programs to try to address those skills, they would not participate.

When the Bishop asked me to leave the university and take over the church, I asked the congregation if they were willing to have an impact on education and would they be willing to consider building a school so that we could get young people before they reached 17 and 18 and give them basic skills to be ready for college.

Building with Faith

They envisioned that we would go into the basement of the church and start some clases. Of course, history teaches me that if you do that, people are going to get comfortable, and you'll never move it along.

I said, no, we are going to build a private school that will go from pre-K through 8 and give all the basic skills, with a requirement for discipline, a requirement for the learning of at least one language, and a requirement that the program will deal with the skills they will need to move into the next century, essentially technical skills, computer skills, and all the things that have been missing.

We began a building fund program with nothing: just an idea and faith. In four years, those people raised $1.5 million dollars. They got a hold of the dream.

There was an old hamburger stand, sitting there, dilapidated, doing nothing good for the community. We purchased that and built this school. When we began construction, we concurrently started a pilot school in grades pre-K through 3, because by this point we knew that the building would become a reality.

We argued with officers from time to time about where these students would come from. No one, according to them, would pay money to send their children to school.

We moved into our senior citizens center, took all the community space there, and started

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with what we thought would be 75 students. On startup day, we had 234 students. By the time we opened the new school building, which is equipped for 400 students, we marched in with 480 students.

DR. RATTERAY: This is all by word of mouth? How did they know?

REV. FLAKE: Once the word came forth that we were building a school, we had more applications than we could accept. We discovered that we had already outgrown this $3.8 million building, for which we had no city, state, or federal money. We had raised the money and gotten a mortgage, and we actually own the building.

DR. RATTERAY: Do you still have a long waiting list?

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Joan Davis Ratteray, Ph.D., President

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REV. FLAKE: Yes. Every year, we have over 200 students who cannot get into the school.

In addition, across the street, there was a block of stores that were not being properly utilized or managed. We bought up the whole block of stores and took one of them, a catering house, put five rooms in it, made an early childhood center, and moved all our three and four year olds out of the new building. So what we have been able to do is to have an economic impact on the community but at the same time have an educational impact.

Disciplined, Christian, Black, and Academic

We have taken some students from public school who were not doing well, that are now doing very well. We've even taken some students from the traditional private school, the parochial school system, who were not doing well, and they are doing very well. I attribute this to a number of factors.

First, I said to the people in the church, if you have children you want to go to the school, but you feel that the school is not going to be allowed to discipline them — and I'm not talking about spankings and beatings — then do not contribute to the school.

We want you to understand that we are creating an alternative situation, where discipline will have to be a part of the learning process.

If your child is too good to be disciplined, then we'd rather not have your child, and we will not take your money now with the promise later on that your child is going to be able to be in that school and do whatever he or she wants to do.

Second, we wanted to offer a Christian education, but we didn't want to do it in such a way that it was just religious training.

Our whole approach to teaching Christian education is, teach the principles but then expect the results to be reflected in how those students are applying those principles in relating to other students.

We have devotions every day, and we have our choir, but there is also an analysis of how effective this Christian nurturing is in how they function with other people.

DR. RATTERAY: How do you envision the whole cultural process, the Black culture.

REV. FLAKE: I'm going to get to that. The third keystone would be an inclusion of Black culture, but not from a framework of just saying, "This is a Black history course."

Rather, it's a complete inculcation into the curriculum, and my wife took primary responsibility for those two components: the Christian education component and the Black history component. When you walk into that building, there is no question in your mind that this is a Black school.

Every bulletin board reflects the Black life and the Black history of people. Every class there has as a part of its projects some element of Black history. It is not a February experience. It is an everyday experience in their lives.

As God would so ordain, my election became a major piece of Black history for them. The students in the school were so involved in that whole process, not as campaign workers but just following the campaign and what this meant to them to have their congressman, who was their founder, involved in that process. It was a fantastic thing.

The fourth key had to do with not losing integrity as it relates to the traditional basic educational concepts of reading, writing, and math.

Those are areas in which students just are not performing well, in general, in public education.

At the same time, we make certain that the language requirement is met early on. We have students in preschool who at least get a basic introduction to Spanish, so that they are removed

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from ultimately developing a fear of foreign language.

As you know, when it's time to take some of the professional graduate examinations, many students do not go on into a doctoral program because they did not learn early on that there is nothing to fear.

We do the same thing with math: we make them understand that this is a part of everyday living.

I was scared of math, until I got a job with Xerox and knew that if I did not at least overcome that fear, I wouldn't be able to get a paycheck every month. My life was dependent upon doing good marketing analysis studies, and those studies would determine how much of the product I would be able to get into various places. They also were willing to send me to business school. So I overcame my fear pretty quickly.

What we want to do is make sure the children get it early. If they can get it early in life, then by the time they get out of eighth grade, our perception is that even if they run into a poor high school experience, most of them will be able to survive it and still be able to qualify with decent scores to get into college.

We hope the day will come when we will also be able to put a high school piece in place, so that those students will be ready to be able to handle the college experience.

They will have overcome the fear of standardized tests to the point of being able to know that there is nothing that will keep them from being able to make it beyond college.

Attaining Academic Excellence

DR. RATTERAY: What do you see is the most pressing need in the education of Black and minority students in general?

REV. FLAKE: I think the most pressing need has to do with trying to educate them to the point of believing that education is important and that the attainment of academic excellence is not antithetical to being a Black person.

One can be sharp and bright and good and intelligent and still be Black. They take the position too often that if you are Black, you ought not be these things.

That diverges from our historical posture as a people, which was to hunger and thirst to be the best, to excel beyond whatever limitations may have been placed upon us.

our historical posture...was...to hunger and thirst to be the best

DR. RATTERAY: How do you think we got into that?

REV. FLAKE: You know, the truth of the matter is, the 1960s were our best times and our worst times. What followed the Civil Rights Movement was an era of permissiveness.

We, as a people, historically operated with discipline – a kind of family discipline, a community discipline.

Suddenly, the more liberal element of the White community that had participated with us in the Civil Rights Movement moved on to their next movement, which became the peace movement, Vietnam and all of that.

Some of our young people went into that movement without understanding that when the movement was all over, the White youth would go to work for their fathers in their businesses or got jobs in the corporations where their fathers were in charge.

Our children went back to their communities or back to the streets, because when they dropped out of school, there was no one to pick them up.

Then the war was going on. Many of them wound up in the war. They got their heads bad on that dope. And then they found they had come back home to no jobs, no education – nothing.

Suddenly, we found ourselves in a society that was lessening its standards, which should have been a point where we tightened ours, but we did not do that.

That openness, that promiscuity, that permissiveness, I think, lead to a kind of destruction.

The other thing is, for whatever it is worth, As, Bs, Cs, Ds and Fs were not destructive to those of us who are my age, but society began to identify a new way to grade.

We came to believe that competitiveness was not important, when everything in America is competitive.

We came to believe that there was something destructive about a child who got a C and another child who got an A, as opposed to what happened to us, where a child with a C was encouraged to work hard to get an A.

That ungraded grading sytem put them into a lull, where "satisfactory" is enough.

In many ways it destroyed them, because "satisfactory" generally means mediocrity. There is no attempt to get to the highest level.

"Satisfactory" might be good enough for other people; that's not good enough for Black people.

DR. RATTERAY: How do you see the public schools and the independent schools working together, or do you?

REV. FLAKE: I, quite frankly, don't see it. I don't think the unions in the public schools are going to allow independent schools to be able to work with them.

I think, though, that the independent schools will force public schools to do a better job. But they will not do it hand in hand.

Role of Christian Schools

DR. RATTERAY: If I may ask two more things here. The success of Allen as an independent school may be due in large part to the intensity of your personal leadership. Do you think that Christian schools as a whole can have a significant role on educating large numbers of Black children?

REV. FLAKE: I think Christian schools are probably the only institution that can do it.

DR. RATTERAY: Why?

REV. FLAKE: The reason is, the Black church, if it chooses, can create the resources to start schools. It's a matter of priorities.

It is an institution that is still respected by most Black people within the community. Whether they participte or not, they still have a degree of respect for the institution.

If the institution develops it, it can happen.

It is one of the few institutions where you have a base of people, and you know that every week at a certain time, you are going to meet that base of people. You can extract from that base, if you really get them focused. You can develop a vision for education, to get them to want to do it. It really can be done.

It is also an institution that is not controlled by the Board of Education or any other entity – city, state, or federal. It is an institution in and of itself, and it can dictate what it wants for its educational program.

DR. RATTERAY: How do you see the future of independent schools? Do you think it is going to get better or worse?

REV. FLAKE: I think that the future is going to get better.

Most of the young people who are going into ministry these days are going on through seminaries.

private education... is focused to meet a particular need

As we get a better trained pastorate who can identify this as a necessary area, I believe that you are going to see the development of more schools.

The other thing is that as they see models like Allen, like Bethel in Baltimore, and other schools that are doing it, there is going to be a competition among them to want to do it better.

There will be the development of institutes like yours and unions of schools that will allow them to look at the problems that they share and also look at things they have in common in educating our children.

As there is unity among them – at least kindred spirits, even if physically they are in different cities – they will be able to look at what made one school fail and not do the same thing. They can learn from that experience, and take from the better parts of those schools that are succeeding and make them work.

There is a place for institutes that will help to make the private schools an institution. If we can institutionalize them, there is no limit to what their future will be, because public education will never be able to do what they can do.

It's the same thing when you have state colleges and city colleges, yet you also have private colleges, because they are designed to meet a particular need.

Because you have public education, it does not mean that you cannot justify private education or parochial education, because it is focused to meet a particular need.

There are students who would be out of place at a Michigan State, who are very happy and capable and competent in a Wilberforce.

There are students in my community who would be lost among 4,000 high school students at Andrew Jackson, who could go to a school of 300 or 400 high school students and do exceptionally well, not because that school is inferior but simply because its size and its program meets their needs greater than that of the larger school.

DR. RATTERAY: Thank you.

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